New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1951

Volume XII, Number 26 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of December 3, 1951

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NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"I Am a Camera"

The New York Times

November 29, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

With the assistance of a remarkable actress, John van Druten has put together an impromptu acting piece, "I Am a Camera," which opened at the Empire last evening. The actress is Julie Harris, who was playing a restless tom-boy in the same theatre two years ago. Now she is playing a glib, brassy, temperamental woman of the world—all cleverness, all sophistication. She plays with a virtuosity and an honesty that are altogether stunning, and that renew an old impression that Miss Harris has the quicksilver and the genius we all long to discover on the stage.

* * *

The phrase "impromptu acting piece" indicates the difficulty of describing Mr. van Druten's play. It is interesting. It contains several fascinating characters. It touches on a few vital principles. It is written with the ingratiating informality of his best work. But "I Am a Camera" keeps losing its way all through the evening. Although it never is dull, it never accomplishes much.

Mr. van Druten has adapted it from some stories Christopher Isherwood wrote about life in Berlin in the first days of the Nazis. One of the two principal characters is named Christopher Isherwood. He is a young writer who, like a camera with the shutter open, is taking pictures of people and places in a period of history. He is reporting how a crucial moment in the affairs of the world looked to a bystander.

* * *

On the whole, they looked random and amusing. For "I Am a Camera" is fundamentally the character sketch of an effervescent, amoral English girl who is living a Bohemian life in Berlin and of young Christopher Isherwood, who likes her, enjoys her company and wonders about the futility of what he is doing. There are rumblings of hostility to the Jews, and a pair of young Jews bring their problems into the play for a moment or two.

But on the whole, Mr. Isherwood's camera shows nothing more than the harum-scarum antics of a couple of immensely likable English people, fooling around as young people were in New York, London and Paris in the previous decade.

That is why it is best to accept "I Am a Camera" as an acting piece and to be grateful for the perfection of the stage work that is in it. Out of his own memories of Berlin, Boris Aronson has designed a mouldy, dingy pension room that reeks of living and indicates the rootlessness of the fable. As his own director, Mr. van Druten has done a superb job.

* * *

In the part of the young writer, William Prince is excellent. His acting is as effortless and as engaging as the writing, and he catches all the friendliness, the ineffectualness and the vagrant misgivings of the part. Martin Brooks is also first-rate as an apprehensive young man of Berlin, and Marian Winters gives a tender, poignant performance as a Jewish girl moving toward an ominous world.

There is an immensely enjoyable performance of a sociable landlady by Olga Fabian, who is full of temperament. Catherine Willard plays the more conventional part of an English lady disturbed by her daughter's behavior; and Edward Andrews acts a flamboyant, rich American who cannot be trusted in a crisis.

Mr. Van Druten has written big scenes for his important characters. The scenes ring true; the characters are searchingly observed, and the acting—particularly by Miss Harris—is illuminating and exciting. In view of the high quality of the workmanship, is it ungrateful to wish that "I Am a Camera" had more to say in the theatre? Or that the photography were a little sharper with a wider perspective?

"I AM A CAMERA"

Play by John van Druten, adapted from the stories of Christopher Isherwood; staged by Mr. van Druten; settings by Boris Aronson; costumes by Ellen Goldsborough; presented by Gertrude Macy in association with Walter Starcke at the Empire Theatre, November 28, 1951. The cast:

Christopher Isherwood..... William Prince
Fraulein Schneider.. Olga Fabian
Fritz Wendel.... Martin Brooks
Sally Bowles..... Julie Harris
Natalia Landauer..... Marian Winters
Clive Mortimer..... Edward Andrews
Mrs. Watson-Courtneidge.. Catherine Willard

Synopsis: The action of the play takes place in a room of Fraulein Schneider's flat in Berlin in 1930, before the rise of the Hitler regime. Act I. Scene 1. A summer afternoon. Scene 2. Three months later. Act II. Scene 1. A week later. Scene 2. Five days later. Act III. Scene 1. Two days later. Scene 2. Three days later. Scene 3. Three days later.

DAILY NEWS

November 29, 1951

In 'I Am a Camera' the Characters Just Drift Along; So Does the Play

By JOHN CHAPMAN

John van Druten's oddly titled "I Am a Camera," which Gertrude Macy offered at the Empire Theatre last evening, is about a young writer who has talent and ambition but who has not yet found a point of view or a sense of direction. And neither has the play. For two acts it shows intervals of depth and brilliance, but it falters quite lamentably in the third stanza before it finally comes to a halt. Its best feature is an interesting performance by that interesting young actress, Julie Harris.

The writer in the play is Christopher Isherwood, the English fictioneer from whose stories Mr. van Druten made the stage piece. The title is meant to indicate that Mr. Isherwood, during a footling and aimless sojourn in Berlin in 1930, has seen much, like a camera which has taken a picture—but he has not yet developed the images he has recorded. He must now, after the play is over, think about what has happened—a problem which is of no great interest to me now.

They Prefer Drifting.

In a Berlin rooming house this stage Isherwood—honestly and attractively played by William Prince—is the neighbor and playmate of a giddy English girl who calls herself a whore. These two become devoted friends but are afraid to admit they are in love, for love would give meaning to their lives. They, and particularly the girl, prefer to drift.

It should be surprising to see Miss Harris, who was the vivid, 12-year-old tomboy of "The Member of the Wedding," playing a silk-sheathed, hard-drinking fille de joie—but it wasn't surprising to me last evening, for I have always felt that Miss Harris is a fine young actress with a remarkably acute sense of the theatrical. In the first act or so of "I Am a Camera" she reveals herself as an excellent comedienne, and she is equally effective in more emotionally touching scenes.

These two, the writer and the girl, are in Berlin when the Nazi movement is first gaining strength. Among their friends are a Jewish girl, a young man who pretends he isn't a Jew, a rich and party-loving American and a voluble landlady. These roles are nicely played by Marian Winters, Martin Brooks, Edward Andrews and Olga Fabian, but none of the characters is particularly forceful or important to the play. And I am brought to the doleful conclusion that the parts for Miss Harris and Mr. Prince aren't particularly forceful or important, either. Mr. van Druten has written a minor work in a minor key.

New York Post

November 29, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

Striking Play of Pre-Nazi Berlin

The adroit John van Druten, with the immense help of a stunning performance by the oncoming Julie Harris, has made a striking, intelligent and steadily arresting play out of Christopher Isherwood's stories of Berlin in the ominous days just before the Nazi rise to power. Under the somewhat unalluring title of "I Am a Camera," the new work was presented at the Empire Theater last night, where, aided by its author's all-around skill as a man of the drama and the playing of a particularly satisfactory cast, it proved that the stage, thank heaven, is alive again. "I Am a Camera" makes the theater once more worth bothering about.

There are, I think, a number of reasons for admiring Mr. van Druten's play, but it would be worth the attention of theatergoers if only because it places Miss Harris in a position for which she has long been headed, among the really important American actresses. It has long been evident that the young heroine of "The Member of the Wedding" was one of our coming stars, and, as the sweet little English prostitute of "I Am a Camera," she has very definitely arrived. Hers is a characterization rich in resource, variety, humor and honest emotional power.

Author's Plan

In his new play, Mr. van Druten has set out to do something both interesting and difficult, and it seems to me that he has succeeded rather remarkably. It was his plan, first of all to write a theatrical work that was more concerned with mood than with action, and with setting it down in a form that might seem to belong more to the novelette than to the drama. Second, he has built dramatic power by contemplating the story of the highly Platonic relationship between the girl prostitute and a young English writer, frankly called Christopher Isherwood, against the sinister background of a black period in mankind's history.

If the author's title is not exactly an appealing one, it is at least accurate. For it is all seen through the eyes of Isherwood, an observant and rather precious young man, who thinks of himself as an objective observer of the events taking place around him, a recorder of action but not a participant in it. Yet, just as the youthful novelist slowly finds himself becoming involved in the life of the girl, he likewise discovers that he cannot keep himself from emotional involvement with the horror of Nazi encroachment and the savage persecution of the Jews. It is a virtue of the play that its characters grow before your eyes.

Course of History

I suspect that Mr. Van Durten is not always successful in expressing this drama of counterpoint Perhaps, too, the equivocal character of Isherwood, although it is splendidly played by William Prince, is never entirely clarified in the writing. Nevertheless, to a remarkable extent, he has succeeded in showing something of the monstrous course of history reflected against the trivial sex life of a Berlin fiat, just as he has given a large measure of life even to this slightly enigmatic writer-hero, as well as to all the minor figures of his narrative. And what seems to me of particular importance is that, even when his play is not quite resolved, it is real, provocative and absorbing.

Although Miss Harris' really distinguished performance dominates the proceedings through its vivid reality, the other performances are likewise very close to perfection. Mr. Prince deserves enormous credit for the handling of a difficult part. An actress, new to me, named Marian Winters is tremendously real and touching as the courageous daughter of a Jewish department-store owned. Olga Fabian is remarkably effective as a "good" German who surrenders to Nazi prejudice, and Martin Brooks is excellent as a young man afraid to admit he is a Jew. Catherine Willard and Edward Andrews help in smaller roles, and Boris Aronson has contributed another of his fine sets. The season comes to life with "I Am a Camera."

New York World-Telegram
and
The ~~Evening~~ Sun

November 29, 1951

Julie Harris Clicks In 'I Am a Camera'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Within a couple of minutes after her first entrance in "I Am a Camera" last night, Julie Harris had irrevocably projected a complete character and filled the Empire with energy that was to keep the audience attentively elated all evening.

Her sensitivity and her stout grip on the play lead her to give one of the most remarkable performances you need hope to see.

Stanch Evening.

It is silly to talk about her becoming a star. If stardom means drawing power, she made everybody who ever saw "Member of the Wedding" anxious to see what she would do next. Here she confirms the versatility, taste, clarity and refinement of her acting sense.

Even if the previous new plays this year had had any quality, "I Am a Camera" would be a stanch unusual evening. John Van Druten has done a both uproarious and poignant dramatization of Isherwood's picture of Berlin on the eve of Nazidom. He has directed it with brilliant finesse.

These are lost young people in 1930, running away from substance toward mirages, gorging distractions. They are amoral in a smart-aleck, postwar manner and deliberately blind to the kindling of the new war.

Plays an English Girl.

Miss Harris plays an English girl singing in a Berlin night club.

The play is mainly concerned with her rare friendship with a young writer, her only platonic male friend.

She gets into "trouble." They prepare for an excursion, the treat of a rich American. But he ducks out, and the girl's mother tries to take her home. The writer's rich pupil, a Jewish girl, unconsciously converts a decadent wolf, who falls in love with her. The landlady finds Jew baiting a solace for her own failure.

Van Druten has kept the play taut with petty hysteria, which, as much as the lines themselves, suggests the subconscious fear of the period.

Writes a Pal.

The writer, played by William Prince, is exactly a pal, virile without being positive, fond, agreeable and a fall guy. It is his author's monologues, writing aloud, that guide the play through a literary transfer from the present to 1930.

Marian Winters is excruciatingly sensitive as the Jewish girl. She turns out to be stronger than any of the acquaintances who tolerate her humorless attempts at friendship. Martin Brooks has some striking moments as the callous youth who falls in love with her.

Olga Fabian is splendid as the landlady, a long part, verging on caricature. She gets all her laughs but keeps the character sympathetic.

Edward Andrews plays the rich American with the delightful eccentricity of a recently retired cheer leader. Catherine Willard has the ingenious taste to make the mother a cool, quiet horror, with her assurance and "modern" manners.

There is rarely a minute without rich, pointed laughter. With it, there is always a macabre atmosphere of pretentious decadence more wasteful than evil. It stays in your memory as the vision of Julie Harris, glittering of eye, purring of voice, in black satin with net sleeves, green fingernails, earrings and beauty spot, childishly demanding that she be accepted "as I am."

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

November 29, 1951

By WALTER F. KERR

JOHN Van Druten has brought us the first flesh-and-blood people of the season. They are not altogether pleasant people, these rootless and bewildered expatriates of the thirties, and "I Am a Camera" treats them with great detachment. It lets them go their troubled, vain, sometimes amusing and sometimes exasperating ways without ever forcing them into a tidy plot, or cheapening them by easy bids for sympathy.

• • •

The play at the Empire, as its title firmly announces, looks at life in a tawdry Berlin rooming house of 1930 with a stringently photographic eye. For the most part, it concerns itself with the mercurial and irresponsible moods of a girl called Sally Bowles. When we first meet her, she is a creature of extravagant attitudes, given to parading her vices, enormously confident that she is going to take life in her stride. She is fond of describing herself as an extraordinarily interesting person, and she is vaguely disturbing.

As we get to know her, as we watch her make frightened arrangements for an illegal operation, seize at the tinseled escape offered by a rich and worthless American playboy, attempt to rehabilitate herself and fail ludicrously, we are more and more moved, more and more caught up in the complete and almost unbearable reality of this girl.

Julie Harris has taken every facet of this challenging personality and absorbed it into a fascinating full-length portrait. You cannot catch her making her transitions, so subtly has she managed them. And in every scene of pretense, in every gay birdlike gesture, there is always the shadow of the heartbreaking figure Sally Bowles really is. When, at the end of the second act, she attempts to dismiss her failures with a light-hearted joke, she laughs, and her laughter is eerie and very touching.

• • •

Mr. Van Druten has adapted the play from some short stories by Christopher Isherwood, and he has placed a character named for Mr. Isherwood on the stage. This character, played boyishly by William Prince, serves both as narrator and as principal confidant to Sally Bowles. He is the camera eye of the title, attracted to Sally yet dispassionate about her, and at the evening's close he is left merely wondering what will become of her. Mr. Prince does not, in all honesty, play the part very well. He handles the narrative passages with a rhythm which never corresponds to the thought patterns written down for him, and he is inclined to be coy when he is required to be charming.

Miss Harris is strikingly supported, however, by two other members of the company. Marian Winters, as a repressed Jewess, and Martin Brooks, as the fortune-hunter who pursues and then falls genuinely in love with her, bring great excitement to their principal scenes. The plight of the Jew in a Germany just coming under the spell of Hitler has been treated before, and exhaustively. But both the writing and the playing are so fresh and perceptive in this instance that the material comes stingingly alive.

• • •

The casual method which Mr. Van Druten has employed in "I Am a Camera," and the concentration on character at the expense of story, has its penalties. The play is sometimes lacking in tension, and the people are seen so pitilessly as to make deep affection for them impossible. But the writing is honest and literate, always arresting on its own terms. And Miss Harris gives a stunning performance.

Journal American

November 29, 1951

Julie Harris Held Better Than Play

By ROBERT GARLAND

Don't tell me that as distinguished a dramatist as John van Druten has fallen into the habit of having his players take over his plays. It looks as if he had! Last November, Lilli Palmer and Rex Harrison took over "Bell, Book and Candle." This November, Julie Harris and William Prince take over "I Am a Camera."

Mr. van Druten's adaptation of Christopher Isherwood's stories would be in a worse way without Miss Harris and Mr. Prince to feed her. From the beginning to the end of "I Am a Camera" that is all the late Orlando has to do. Feed her! He *feeds* her in one of the best young male voices to be heard on the American stage.

Miss Harris, while being fed, moves one more round up the ladder of success. Her this season's Sally Bowles is as far removed from her last season's Frankie Addams as any character could be. Yet it is no less well-rounded in the young actress' hands. But, to me, it is considerably less interesting, less alive.

Whether these shortcomings are John van Druten's or Christopher Isherwood's I can't say. But I can say that Sally Bowles grows monotonous as the evening wanes. Just because she's a bad girl, she's not good company all the way through. As an onlooker, I wish she'd shut up or go home.

• • •

Talks Too Much

This adaptation of Christopher Isherwood's stories deals with Sally Bowles, her yes-men and women. The lady's a member of the oldest profession in the world. But she hasn't the hardness to be successful. I think she talks too much and stalks too little. She's a professional amateur.

She walks the streets of Berlin. It's the German capital of 1930, when the Nazis were coming into power. There's no little fuss about them. But it doesn't enter into the play. The play is concerned with Sally Bowles, her ever changing leanings toward Clive Mortimer and Christopher Isherwood.

Mr. Isherwood, the "hero", is also the "camera" of the title. The camera of the title with his shutter open. He sees all but tells practically nothing. After his fashion, he loves Sally Bowles. Babies without a father, illegal operations, rich but forgetful rivals worry him not at all. He really is amoral.

There's a lesser love affair between Fritz Wendel and Natalia Landauer. This one is mercenary. And it's so unimportant that I forget what becomes of it. Forgetting, it doesn't matter. It's never a piece of the Julie Harris-William Prince get together. It's an unhappy twosome of its own.

• • •

Fed Sincerely

If you ask me of the acting, I say it is better than the play—or adaptation, as John van Druten has it—deserves. Especially Julie Harris as Sally Bowles. In style, in looks, in makeup, Miss Harris is a revelation. And I suppose she can't help being monotonous. She only has a few things to change. These she changes.

William Prince feeds Miss Harris sincerely. And in one of the best male voices now on the American stage. Otherwise, he has nothing else to do. But he does that nothing well. Olga Fabian gets a nice hand as Fraulein Schneider. She most certainly deserves it. The same can be said of Martin Brooks' Fritz Wendel.

Marian Winters has the role of Natalia Landauer. She's forthright and deserving. So's Edward Andrews as Clive Mortimer. It isn't Mr. Andrews' fault if his on again, off again, gone-again gentleman-caller seldom comes to life. Catherine Willard is at home as Mrs. Watson-Courtneidge, Sally Bowles' mother.

To tell the truth, John van Druten's adaptation of Christopher Isherwood's stories isn't too interesting all the way through. Mr. van Druten steps aside as a dramatist and lets Julie Harris and William Prince take over. They are players. And what they do becomes monotonous. Especially Miss Harris, outstanding as she is.

Daily Mirror

November 29, 1951

'I Am a Camera' Offers A Moving Experience

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In "I Am a Camera," dramatist John Van Druten portrays author Christopher Isherwood focusing, developing and printing nostalgic and momentous events that he experienced in the Berlin of 1930. Don't let the unusual title scare you off, for the Empire Theatre's new tenant offers an amusing and moving evening.

Isherwood was trying to write books while he earned a meagre living as an English teacher. He was just finding himself as a writer and a person. Then he encountered a girl known as Sally Bowles. Of a good British family, she sought excitement singing in nightclubs and having a series of affairs.

Sally lived in a dizzy world of her own. She daydreamed, and pretended to be something she really wasn't. She and Isherwood desired desperately to be ultra-sophisticated, worldly-wise beyond their years. They were likable, engaging young people who thought it smart to use naughty words, start breakfast with brandy and flaunt conventions.

Sally and Isherwood finally arrived at a wonderfully platonic stage of friendship and understanding. They admired one another, but wisely realized they were not meant for marriage to each other. The last curtain falls on a tragic note. Hitler's hoodlums have just started to take over Germany, to launch the frightful persecutions.

As Sally flitted blithely away to the Riviera to appear in a film, Isherwood had begun to realize the catastrophe and heartbreak in store for the world. He had become aware that life was to be a serious matter for his generation, that courage would be demanded of men and women of goodwill.

Under Van Druten's persuasive direction, an excellent cast catches beautifully the youthful joys and disillusionments of a period. Julie Harris is captivating as the extrovert Sally, a typical product of the Jazz Age headed for a crash. William Prince brings warmth and conviction to the role of young Isherwood. Edward Andrews provides hilarious moments as a wacky playboy. Marian Winters and Martin Brooks are stirring as victims of the rising Nazi terror. Salutes also are due Catherine Willard and Olga Fabian.

Boris Aronson has contributed an atmospheric setting.

Gertrude Macy, in association with Walter Starcke, has given us a welcome hit. "I Am a Camera" will make you laugh a lot and perhaps weep a little, too. It is a fascinating study of a hectic era, a sympathetic and intelligent portrayal of flaming youth forced to face stark reality.

The Empire has been a lucky theatre for young Miss Harris, for there she scored a triumph as the lonely tomboy in "The Member of the Wedding." Sally Bowles is really Frankie Addams several years older, and just as arresting.

"Gigi"

DAILY NEWS

November 26, 1951

Audrey Hepburn, Michael Evans Make 'Gigi' a Charming Fairy Tale

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Things theatrical took a turn for the better last Saturday evening when Gilbert Miller presented Anita Loos' "Gigi" at the Fulton Theatre. This comedy is a sentimental fairy tale about a candy prince and a Parisian Cinderella, and its sole motive is to be charming. But since it is charming, and since it does look as though it had been staged on purpose and not by accident, it brightens a playgoer's season considerably.

Miss Loos has taken her play from one of those very French novels by Colette, a sucessful manufacturer of ladies' fiction. Gigi is a leggy, boisterous, graceless lass of 15 in a poor but sufficiently genteel home, who enjoys extravagantly the visits of a rich young man of fashion because he brings her candy, romps with her and permits her to cheat him at cards.

Easy to Guess.

It should be easy for you to guess the rest of the plot. About the time the girl passes 16, Love awakens like a firehouse dog at the sound of an alarm. The French part of the story lies in the young man's proposal of marriage, which is a rude shock to three of Gigi's female relatives; they have been scheming all along to have the girl established as the young dog's newest mistress.

Under the direction of Raymond Rouleau, the comedy has a pleasant atmosphere and some remarkably good performances. Audrey Hepburn, a lass from English music-shows and movies, plays the title role with great enthusiasm and a fine instinct for acting, and Michael Evans does a witty and skillful job of playing a wealthy, woman-spoiled but basically likeable young rake. A less tasteful actor than Mr. Evans could have made this character a sore trial to American audiences.

The Best Scene.

Indeed, the whole company is just right, so that one does not even mind such super-elegant lines as, "Monsieur Lachaille in Paris? But this is the week of the flower fete at Nice!" The best scene in "Gigi" is one in which Cathleen Nesbitt, the girl's aunt and a cocotte of long and successful experience, instructs the lass on the need for one's extracting jewelry from one's admirers. It is a delightful sermon on the theme, diamonds are a girl's best friend, and Miss Nesbitt delivers it subtly, gracefully and humorously.

The other amusingly played characters include. Josephine Brown's portrait of Gigi's grimly ambitious grandmother; Doris Patston's burlesque of Gigi's mother, a music-show actress with no talent and no brains; Bertha Belmore's character bit as a part-time maid, and Francis Compton in another of his solemn butler roles.

Raymond Sovey is credited with some of his best work, with the sets and entre-scene curtains. Gigi's home is a cluttered, middle-class horror of the period, and Miss Nesbitt's boudoir is just the sort of room an acquisitive professional mistress with fancy tastes would acquire.

"GIGI"

Comedy by Anita Loos, adapted from Colette's novel; staged by Raymond Rouleau; settings by Raymond Sovey; presented by Gilbert Miller at the Fulton Theatre, November 24, 1951. The cast:

Gigi.....Audrey Hepburn
Mme. Alvarez..Josephine Brown
Andree.....Doris Patston
Gaston Lachaille..Michael Evans
Victor.....Francis Compton
Alicia de St. Ephlam.....
Cathleen Nesbitt
Sidonie.....Bertha Belmore

Synopsis: Paris, 1900. Act I. Scene 1. The apartment of Mme. Alvarez. Scene 2. The boudoir of Alicia de St. Ephlam. Scene 3. Mme. Alvarez's apartment. Act II. Scene 1. Mme. Alvarez's apartment. Scene 2. Alicia's boudoir. Scene 3. Mme. Alvarez's apartment.

The New York Times
November 26, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Although "Gigi" is very French, it is also very trivial and old-fashioned. This comes as something of a surprise. For it is a comedy that Anita Loos has made out of one of Colette's novels; and the production, which opened at the Fulton Saturday evening, has been staged with notable elegance by people of taste. Among other things, it introduces us to Audrey Hepburn, a young actress of charm, honesty and talent who ought to be interned in America and trapped into appearing in a fine play.

* * *

"Gigi" falls below that standard. It is a comedy about an enchanting adolescent maiden in Paris at the turn of the century who is being tenderly brought up to be a mistress. Her mother, her grandmother and her aunt have been respected cocottes all their lives and hope that Gigi will do well if not better.

One of Paris' wealthiest and most fashionable young gentlemen is an old friend of the family and falls in love with Gigi when she is sixteen. Being experienced in such things, Gigi's aunt starts making arrangements to see that Gigi is set up properly by her lover. Everyone happily agrees except Gigi. Gigi despises the demi-monde. The young gentleman removes her objections by proposing to marry her. Everyone else is horrified by so candid and novel an arrangement. But there seems to be no better solution.

* * *

In Colette's French this may all have a piquancy and wit that escape us here. For the idea is satirical and worldly and suited to impudent theatre. But the comedy Miss Loos has written is a fairly literal statement of a satirical point of view, and it does not have much quality of its own until the final scene, when Gigi rebels against the manners of the town. This makes for an agreeably romantic conclusion to a dullish sort of play.

In the circumstances we have to take what comfort we can in the production and the performance. Fortunately, both have merit. Raymond Sovey has designed two brilliant settings of Paris a half century ago; and someone has also sketched pictorial curtains for every scene. Together with some festive music, and the three traditional thumps on the stage to announce the rise of the curtains, the mise en scene gives "Gigi" a gay atmosphere.

* * *

Under Raymond Rouleau's fluid and spirited direction, the acting has real distinction. Cathleen Nesbitt's shrewd and fashionable aunt with imperious manners; Michael Evans' slender, dapper young man of the town; Josephine Brown's obese, panting harridan are acted with flavor and style. Doris Patston plays the part of a mediocre actress amusingly. There is a comic, overbearing old drudge by Bertha Belmore; and Francis Compton plays a witty butler in a style he mastered long ago.

But Miss Hepburn is the one fresh element in the performance. She is an actress; and as Gigi she develops a full-length character from artless gaucheries in the first act to a stirring emotional climax in the last scene. It is a fine piece of sustained acting that is spontaneous, lucid and captivating.

Miss Loos and Colette have nothing else so genuine to offer in their tired stroll through the byways of an old-fashioned Paris and an old-fashioned theatre.

Journal American
November 26, 1951

First Non-Musical Hit of the Season

By ROBERT GARLAND

Well nigh everything at the Fulton is a theatrical delight. Maybe the Anita Loos adaptation of Sodonie Colette's point-of-view might be more Gallic. Maybe the direction of Raymond Rouleau might be less so. But these are quibbles. Presented on Saturday night by Gilbert Miller, "Gigi" is a joy.

Even the decor by Raymond Sovey. Mr. Sovey, who started his theatrical career by acting in and doing the scenery for my "The Double Miracle" at the Vagabond Playhouse in Baltimore, is credited with the settings. And the between-scenes curtains that go with them. Each is exceptional, truly.

Yet each blends into "Gigi" as "Gigi" blends into it. This is also true of the actors and the actresses. Especially of the actresses. Although the lover and the butler are good, the grandmother, the mother, the aunt and the maid-servant are better. And Gigi, herself, in person, is simply grand.

The growing girl who gives the play its title is impersonated by Audrey Hepburn. Of real Irish-Dutch parentage, Miss Hepburn comes from England. From the theatre, the ballet and the films. Her latest on-screen assignment is "Nous Irons a Monte Carlo." She is, I think, a young lady here to stay.

She is, I know, one of the reasons why "Gigi" is the season's first success without songs and dances.

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Diamonds Are . . .

Sodonie Colette's point-of-view should be familiar. If not, "Gigi" will soon make it so. The play is Gallic, topsy-turvy and not as avant garde as it sounds. Gaston Lachaille's equivalents even have mistresses in America. But not as reluctant ones as Mme. Alvarez's on-stage granddaughter.

The action is divided between the apartment of Mme. Alvarez, our heroine's grandma, and the boudoir of Alicia de St. Ephlam, our heroine's aunt. One is not wiser than the other. Only more successful. The successful one is the Aunt Alicia, who knows that good diamonds are a mistress's best bet.

Both aunt and grandmother are afraid that Gigi will marry and settle down in middle-class respectability. So is Gigi's mother who, when not working on the operas that are grand, is working on her daughter. She, too, is afraid our heroine will make the mistake of becoming commonplace.

But Gigi and Sodonie Colette think otherwise. So, after a good deal of first-rate fun and character study, our heroine marries Gaston Lachaille without an effort. He is more than willing. He had merely not thought of matrimony, along with Gigi's relatives. It is laughingly surprising to them all.

To think of Gigi Alvarez with a house in town, a chateau in the country, a wedding ring and all.

* * *

Pleasure to Watch

The style with which "Gigi" is produced lends to its distinction. The players assembled by Gilbert Miller are stylish. They act as if to the manner born. And as if they were a unit. It is a pleasure to watch them work for their common good. I haven't seen it in a long time.

Again I call your attention to Miss Hepburn. Admitting she must practice, she has the something you can't be without. She will go places. She will do things. Meanwhile, she is delightful as Gigi, daughter of Andree, granddaughter of Mme. Alvarez, niece of Alicia de St. Ephlam and, finally, fiancee of Gaston Lachaille.

Taking the others as they come, Josephine Brown is as right as right can be as Mme. Alvarez. So is Doris Patston as the mother. Cathleen Nesbit is in top form as Alicia, the aunt. Her good-diamonds-are-a-mistress's-best-bet scene couldn't be bettered. Bertha Belmore, as Sodonie, is a necessity.

The men are all right. Francis Compton, as Alicia de St. Ephlam's knowing butler, is excellent. So is Michael Evans as Gaston Lachaille, a thankless part. The adaptation of Anita Loos might be more fluent. The direction of Raymond Rouleau might be less foreign. The contributions of Raymond Sovey are memorable.

"Gigi," like Beerbohm Tree's "Hamlet," is funny without being vulgar. And as Gallic as the Eiffel Tower.

New York World-Telegram
and
The ~~Evening~~ Sun

November 26, 1951

'Gigi' Has Charm But Lacks Style

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

For a play concerned exclusively with sex, "Gigi" is more cool than tantalizing. It has humor and occasional charm, but not enough to heal its lack of radiance or style.

Adapted from a classic of Colette, it tells of true love's discovery by a 16-year-old in Paris of the '90s. Her matriachal family considers marriage traditionally suspect. It is training her in its hearty pattern.

The youngster's great aunt has found her calling the most rewarding. It is she who makes overtures to the rich young man for a legal "arrangement" which will start young Gigi out. At this point the young lady takes over and settles matters according to her own untraditional lights.

Sexless Sex.

The performance, at least the first one, lacks the warmth of a realistic approach to the story. The result is to make sex absolutely sexless.

One should feel concern for Gigi. She is directed to outrun and outleap Babe Didrickson, until you may feel much more apprehensive about the man in the case.

The script suggests a clannish family, yet they match in neither personality nor manner. The four women are played by actresses who establish no more mutual affection than rush hour passengers on a subway.

Audrey Hepburn, in the title role, has unquestionable beauty and talent. She looks like a robust Vivien Leigh, and acts with grace and authority, if in this case without much relaxation.

Definite Viewpoints.

Of the others, Bertha Belmore and Francis Compton, in tiny roles as two servants, seemed to me the most believable people in the play, with sharp outlines and definite points of view.

As the older ladies of the family, Josephine Brown, Cathleen Nesbitt and Doris Patston, operate with many external mannerisms, and never once project an emotion that is felt deeply enough to move you in the audience. Michael Evans, as the suitor, similarly remains an aggressive cartoon.

Miss Nesbitt has a nice sequence explaining to Gigi the relative values of precious stones, and Miss Belmore has a riotous bit with a telephone.

"Gigi" gets laughs, mainly in the second act, but it never has the quality or texture that could make it lovable. Despite a beautifully crusty pair of sets, there is more feeling of period and intended mood in the lovely entracte curtains and the gay curtain calls at the end, than in nine-tenths of the actual performance.

New York Post

November 26, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Slight Disappointment in 'Gigi'

The famous French touch was not quite as gay and festive as it should have been at the Fulton Theater Saturday night. Gilbert Miller has given "Gigi," the comedy that Anita Loos adapted from the novel by the celebrated Colette, a pictorially enchanting production, and he has cast in the title role a lovely young actress named Audrey Hepburn, who is also enchanting. There is a pleasantly Gallic little anecdote to serve as the story, and several of the scenes have just the right note of sly shamelessness. Indeed, so much of "Gigi" is charming that it seems all the more melancholy that the final effect is just a little disappointing.

Let me set down some of the good things first. Raymond Sovey has designed two Paris interiors that are completely delightful and some atmospheric curtains for between the scenes that are particularly a joy. The incidental music is not only pleasant but adds notably to the mood of the occasion. Mr. Miller's production is just as lovely as the one he arranged last season for the sadly unappreciated "Ring Round the Moon." Then, too, young Miss Hepburn, an Irish-Dutch girl making her debut in this country, brings a fresh quality of humorous innocence and earnestness to the role of a Paris ingenue that is entirely beguiling.

Some Complaints

Why, then, with the virtues I have already mentioned and several others in addition, does "Gigi" seem a little flat, a little lacking in brightness, deftness and debonair gayety? For one thing, it comes to life so intermittently. It always seems on the verge of getting started, but only too rarely does it exert its humorous spell. When it is good, it is very good, but there are long spaces when it appears to be marking time. I didn't see the French movie, which was also based on Colette's novel, but I am afraid that the talented Miss Loos will have to be blamed for failing to capture consistently what must have been the sparkle of the original.

At the risk of not helping to improve Franco-American relations, I must also add my suspicion that the staging of Raymond Rouleau, the French director who was brought over to direct the play, has not been completely helpful to "Gigi." M. Rouleau, no doubt feeling that Americans love movement and bounce in their comedies, didn't molest his actors with any ideas of restraint. The result is that the performance as a whole seems mannered and slightly self-conscious without developing a really satisfactory style. I thought that the director once or twice allowed his players to get somewhat out of hand.

Family Life

The setting of "Gigi," as you probably know, is Paris of 1900, and its story is about three raffish French ladies who look with disapproval on the institution of marriage. For two generations, the women of this family have declined matrimony and when Gigi, who represents the third generation, begins to show signs of growing up, they decide to prepare her for following their illustrious example. It is enough to say that they are pretty shocked when they find that their little girl wants to marry the man they have picked for her. Such an anecdote requires the lightest and deftest of story-telling, but rarely achieves it.

The delightful Miss Hepburn obviously is not an experienced actress, but her quality is so winning and so right that she is the success of the evening. The other members of the cast are players of knowledge and skill, but I have seen them better. As always, Francis Compton is excellent as a wise butler, but Cathleen Nesbitt, a splendid actress, struck me as less deft than usual as Gigi's aunt. Michael Evans, Josephine Brown, Bertha Belmore and Doris Patston are competent, but the latter three occasionally seemed to be doing vaudeville turns. There is a great deal that is agreeable in "Gigi," but I wish it had more consistent brightness.